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Bush Negroes
Saramacca

It appeared that nothing in a woman's life was so dreaded as childbearing, nothing more coveted than fertility, and no time so difficult and so anxious as when a woman was rearing her children.

"The day before a girl marries she prays all day to her gods," said Dida, who with Fenekonde and several other women had joined us. "I begged my god Kesekia and gave him rice and rum. All day they played the agida. I begged him not to hate my husband. I begged him to give us children."

When a woman conceived, her husband made her many obias, and especially a black sack obia with four cowries sewed on it, to keep her safe on the paths which led from village to village, and from village to her field. The fear of the power of bad magic at this time was so great that, if we but looked at one of the pregnant women, or let our eyes rest on the several obias she wore, she grew nervous, covered them with both her hands, and disappeared in fear that the very power of our glance might weaken the potency of the charms. She did not believe in the white man's magic, but she was not in a condition to wish to put it to a test.

"When her time comes, a woman sees to it that she is in her own village," said Fenekonde. "It is not good to give birth in the bush, or on the river."

This had almost happened to Wilhelmina with her last child. She was on the river alone in a boat. Chief Sungi of Dahomey met her and called on his gods to delay the coming of the child until he brought her home. He had strong obia, and so the misfortune was averted.

When the woman felt the first labor-pains, she prayed to the gods, and to her personal spirits. On the great Sky God she called, and the Earth Mother; on her ak'a, her soul; on the Yorka, the ancestors; and then she prayed to her personal gods, and particularly to whatever snake gods she might have, for some of these were known to be jealous of a coming child. But none of the gods dared be slighted.

538 fascinated. It showed, in its purest form, the retention of the African mask-like head. Sometimes on the prow of a boat we would see in cruder form the outlines of a mask, and once an old woman came with a food stirrer to us. Its handle ended in a knob which with a few strokes of the knife had been formed into a double representation of the human [191] head, a perfect parallel to the type of mask that is associated with the people of the Ivory Coast.

539 Aside from the decorated apinti drum, only some of the 191 workaday art forms of Africa—combs, paddles, mortars, among other such objects—were retained. For their decoration the designs that in Africa had been cut into the base of figures or about the borders of masks had been remembered and reinterpreted in terms of the ancestral cults. And from those memories the Bush Negroes had developed the unique art which is theirs.

539 Thus, in the main, the art was symbolic, and many of the 181 designs represented the urge for reproduction. Some 84 stemmed from the fertility cult, though not entirely of it. There was, for example, the double-bladed food stirrer, [626] which was given by a man to his wife with a curse woven into its curves for the woman if she committed adultery.

539 There were carvings that did not deal with sex at all. On the lower river we sat on the shore as a canoe came up. Prow and stern were carved. On one of the seats was a representation of the head of a feline, done with the utmost realism.

"You have *tigri*?" we asked the man, as we bargained for the seats.

"I will sell you this, but do not ask me what it means."

The bird-headed paddles were also examples of this kind. [501] When laid on their sides, they showed the form of the parrot, or whatever bird they represented—the exaggerated beak, the head, the neck, the wings, and the feet. The [791] design called *Alukutu folo*, an emblem of those who could see into the future, was engraved on many benches on the upper river in particular, and these carvings were parted with only with the greatest reluctance, lest we try